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AUTHOR Wharton, Clifton R., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Higher education in the United States is under seige. Students clamor for better teaching and greater academic "relevance." Faculty seek stronger protection of their interests through collective bargaining. State legislatures and private donors have shifted higher education downward on their lists of fiscal priorities. To reverse this drift, trustees and presidents must take the initiative. If higher education is to put its house in order and restore its esteem among various publics, trustees and presidents must develop a joint counterattack. Only through improved teamwork, recognizing our complementarities within an intelligent division of labor, can we hope to provide sorely needed leadership.
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The Stewardship of Trustees and the President

Clifton R. Wharton, Jr.

The university does not lend itself to pure democracy and only the president and trustees can truly address and meld the broad range of issues. . . . Presidents and trustees must take the lead in striking a balance between societal accountability and institutional integrity.

Higher education in the United States is under siege. Students clamor for better teaching and greater academic "relevance." Faculty seek stronger protection of their interests through collective bargaining. State legislatures and private donors have shifted higher education downward on their lists of fiscal priorities. The general public and federal and state government, disenchanted by "pot, permissiveness, and protest," have raised a cry for reform and accountability.

The list of these forces could be lengthened:

- There is the erosive impact of inflation and reduced funding such as revealed in a recent study showing that the overall annual rate of financial growth in real terms has dropped precipitously from 3.9 percent to .5 percent in just two years.

- The intrusion of federal or state guidelines on affirmative action, wage controls, student aid, and in some cases even standards of faculty productivity and classroom hours have added new administrative binders.

- And the growth of cumbersome internal governance and grievance machinery now demands as much as 10 percent of faculty time.

Under the impact of these and similar forces, higher education has drifted away from its central purposes and its most effective service to society.

Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., is President of Michigan State University.

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My message today is that if we are to break this siege and to reverse this drift, trustees and presidents must take the initiative. If higher education is to put its house in order and restore its esteem among various publics, trustees and presidents must develop a joint counterattack. Only through improved teamwork recognizing our complementarities within an intelligent division of labor, can we hope to provide sorely needed leadership.

The Roles of Trustees and the President

Given the crises which beleaguer us, I believe that we must redefine our responsibilities in terms of the realities of today and the potential of tomorrow. We urgently need to define an appropriate division of labor – a division of labor that allows presidents and trustees each to draw upon the strengths of the other.

We must begin by recognizing that trustees and presidents share one major characteristic: they are the only individuals with a total institutional perspective. In terms of policy determination, only the board has both the necessary authority and the institution-wide perspective. In terms of policy formulation and its execution, only the president has a similar institution-wide perspective and competency.

Such perspectives are indispensable in assigning priorities to goals and groups competing for limited resources, and in dealing with the constituencies which have a vested interest in these priorities. But how is conflict and competition to be resolved – and by whom?

The university does not lend itself to pure democracy and only the president and trustees can truly address and meld the broad range of issues.

These shared perspectives lie at the heart of our joint leadership. We can no longer rely upon a dominant board of trustees or a dominant president. We must forge a partnership wherein we lead together.

What are some of the areas where our division of labor and complementarities are most important?

Let me deal first with trustees. One of the most critical areas lies in their maintenance of the bridge between society and the campus. Trustees must help the university resist improper external interference, while insuring that the institution remains responsive to the appropriate needs of its subsidizers, whether they are direct audiences such as students, the public at large, or a more restricted private constituency.

I have already referred to the trend whereby many trustees have shifted from a position of advocacy for their institutions to one of advocacy for their perceived constituents and the society. I would now like to suggest that both roles are necessary and legitimate, but that an overemphasis on either will leave colleges and universities highly vulnerable.

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Trustees can ably serve as interpreters of their institutions because colleges and universities are highly complex. Even within the university, few faculty, staff, or students grasp the diversity of goals and efforts which characterize the range of instruction, research, and public service. The wider public, which interacts much less intensively with educational institutions, can by itself hardly be expected to comprehend such diversity or to realize its implications. The same is true for legislators who seldom have time to immerse themselves directly in the myriad issues which daily shape higher education.

Trustees can fulfill admirably this interpretive role, a role which complements the president as the institutional spokesman. As governing board members, trustees have a broad perspective available to few other individuals. Ideally, they are acquainted with particulars as well as generalities. In addition, their external involvements and activities may provide channels and contacts in the private sector of the community which can be of major benefit to their college or university.

But trustees cannot ignore other obligations to the society. If they become solely proponents of their institution – right or wrong – they will soon lose public credibility, persuasiveness, and finally, usefulness to the institution. Much more importantly, though, colleges and universities *should* be held accountable by the constituencies which support them. They receive subsidization, contributions, or payments on the assumption that certain benefits – direct or indirect – eventually accrue not only to students, but to the total constituencies from which funding derives. Those constituencies have a right to express themselves regarding policies and programs, and it is through the trustees that their voices are heard.

Yet, no matter how strongly trustees identify with their constituencies, they must take care not to become champions of any single faction to the exclusion of others. A state university, for example, does not belong solely to the faculty, or to the administration, or to the students, or to one of its colleges. Neither does it belong solely to the Chamber of Commerce, to the state legislature, or to its board of trustees. On the contrary, educational institutions are the joint property of society. Trustees, therefore, must be not partisan, but statesmen, governing for the good of the entire institution and its entire constituency.

What of the role of the president? A president is hired to lead an institution. He is the spokesman with a vision for the future and the administrative skills to make the vision real. Without the confidence of the trustees, he will be able to do no more than manage.

Unlike trustees, presidents must deal on a face-to-face basis with nearly all of the exigencies and emergencies that increasingly typify

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the operations of educational institutions — and they do so 16 hours each day, seven days a week. Crisis management, a term never heard in 1965, has become commonplace in 1973. Catchword or not, crisis management devours time and energy that presidents might better spend in academic planning, fiscal strategy, and policy-formulation — the vital leadership activities which only a president can undertake and direct.

Presidents, consequently, must adopt a bilateral approach. Whether they like it or not, they will have to acquire the skills central to confrontation-damping, issue-arbitration, and labor and human relations. Inevitably, there will be occasions when presidents will be called upon personally to employ such techniques.

Whenever possible, however, presidents should develop procedures for delegating crisis management to subordinate staff and for reducing the current vogue of "take it to the top." An almost universal complaint among my fellow presidents is aimed at the common practice of circumventing administrative channels and taking any issue, problem or concern directly to the president. Sometimes the process even bypasses the president, going directly to the board or an individual trustee. Undoubtedly, this tactic is a partial consequence of the confrontation tactics of the protest era; it partly stems, also, from the slowness of bureaucracies within the universities — a slowness often fostered by the very expansion of the participatory governance structure demanded by various constituencies. Regardless of the causes, the corrosive impact of this tendency upon the governance and administrative structure has been enormous. If the president is the target, he must delegate to his immediate staff the functions of all the circumvented offices. If the trustees are the target, they soon find it necessary to re-invent the president!

The challenges facing higher education now and in the future demand exhaustive analysis and planning, efforts to which presidents must devote as much of their time as possible.

In today's world, their leadership is best described as the conjuncture of anticipation, planning, creativity and compromise. Institutional helmsmen must be flexible without further relinquishing authority. Presidents must innovate, but not without sober reflection and careful analysis. They must exercise tact, but not sacrifice action.

In support of this presidential leadership, however, trustees are obliged *not* to govern but to provide *for* governance — that is, they must refrain from immersing themselves in daily administrative tasks. They appoint the president and other key officers to govern the university. They should not attempt to run the institution, but to assure that it is well run. For their part, presidents must respect that the trustees

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are the guardians of the societal mission of the entire institution. Trustees specify overall purposes and policies and the means to achieve them. They are responsible for the welfare of the whole college or university.

Our Mutual Obligations

How is our partnership to be strengthened?

Presidents must help individual trustees identify their own strengths and competencies which may be of particular value to their institutions. The president can also inform the trustees about emerging institutional problems and needs, so that the trustees can apply their skills in areas of special importance and interpret issues to their constituencies. Is the trustee an expert in finance, in real estate, in law, in plant management or administration? The president should involve such a trustee in planning for those areas. Does the trustee have credibility with special constituencies – alumni, business, the church, labor? The president should encourage the trustee to assist the university relations or fund-raising staff with these groups.

Trustees, on the other hand, must be willing to do more than sit in board rooms and vote on policy. Meeting attendance is a serious matter, but the trustees can exercise their leadership additionally as constructive, contributing partners – participating in public relations, committee work, long-run institutional planning and development, and other areas where his or her experience and insight may prove valuable. The participation of trustees, however, must not replace or erode the responsibility of existing administrative units and officers. The distinction is at times subtle, but critically important.

If presidents and trustees are to work in tandem, they must support each other inside and outside their institutions. I do not suggest that the trustees should rubberstamp whatever the president places before them, or vice versa. When administrators and governing boards adhere to constructive objectives and eschew personal animosities or antagonisms, healthy debate results in stronger academic policies and educational programs. Even so, after decisions have been made and policies adopted, presidents and trustees alike should bind themselves together for implementation, all making a genuine effort to contribute to the success of the particular program, project, or policy.

Finally, presidents and trustees have an obligation to keep one another informed about the special dimensions, constraints, and imperatives of their respective roles. A president's views and recommendations are shaped by experiences and circumstances considerably different from those that shape the thinking of trustees. The reverse is equally true. Thus, for presidents and trustees to cooperate fully, they must understand the demands imposed upon each other by their respective

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roles and environment. Above all, presidents and trustees alike must act in their relationships with each other with integrity, mutual respect, good faith, and good will. Since we face the present crisis together, we must work together toward resolution.

Our Joint Responsibility to Society

Presidents and trustees share a responsibility to society as well as to their institutions and to each other. "Accountability" recently has become a very fashionable concept in higher education — fashionable but imprecise. Accountability for what? By whom? To whom? What, for that matter, *is* accountability?

Educational accountability presents difficulties for at least two reasons. In the first place, measurement is a problem. What tangible indicators can a president or trustee cite to demonstrate leadership? Does an increase in student credit hours reflect educational innovation? Is a new building indicative of long-term growth? Is a particular research grant or scholarly award an index of excellence and effectiveness? Like most leaders, presidents and trustees learn to live with ambiguous gauges of success. Their constituencies, on the other hand, find this ambiguity more difficult to accept.

Secondly, accountability requires agreed-upon goals or objectives. Yet, what are the objectives of higher education? How do they differ among institutions? Many constituencies could articulate no goals whatsoever. Even if every constituency *could* explicate concrete and realizable goals, how could they reach consensus? Again, I must ask: to whom are presidents, trustees, and their institutions "accountable," and for what?

Despite the difficulties posed by these questions, I believe that accountability is central to the relationship between society and institutions of higher learning. Colleges and universities, first, must study public expectations of higher education. Many constituencies, they will likely discover, expect the impossible. For example, the public currently blames educational institutions for surpluses and high unemployment in many occupational fields — yet institutions neither force students in their career choices nor regulate the economic cycles which generate jobs.

Next, presidents and trustees must encourage their institutions to engage the public in a dialogue on the real nature and purposes of higher education. Public misconceptions — whether they depict colleges and universities as social blights or as the road to Nirvana — must be replaced by a more accurate and realistic image of higher education. The public must grasp the purposes, nature, and interdependence of research and public service with teaching, as well as the tangible and intangible benefits all three offer to students, to individuals and to the society. The public must also come to understand what education *can* do, and what it *cannot*. When this

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occurs, the public may be able to agree more readily upon the educational objectives for which institutions and their presidents and trustees may be held "accountable."

In pursuing such a goal, [presidents and trustees must take the lead in striking a balance between societal accountability and institutional integrity.] The society, in a sense the patron of colleges and universities, has a right to define broad objectives. The institution, on the other hand, must reserve for itself the privilege of examining, modifying, or adding to those objectives, partially determining its own goals and maintaining at least a degree of independence. I submit that the bond between society and its educational institutions must be not parasitism, but symbiosis.

Conclusions

Through all I have said, an underlying theme has run. The theme is stewardship. In a pluralistic society or institution, only those presidents and trustees who accept responsibility to all legitimate constituents will be able to provide vital and effective leadership. Thus, I have suggested that as educational leaders we must fulfill important obligations to our institutions, and to each other, if we are to serve as useful stewards to society.

In fulfilling our mutual obligation to the wider society, both presidents and trustees must be able to set aside individual concerns and personal differences. We must eschew personal convenience and individual partisanship, substituting a dedication to long-term benefits. Above all, statesmanship must supersede sectarian interests, and the common weal must outweigh factional advantage.

Despite current public disenchantment, our colleges and universities continue to be critically important social institutions. Re-examination need not prove negative or destructive, but offers many avenues for long overdue reform, new directions, and the development of even stronger programs.

The critical problems of society in which we can play an appropriate educational role continue to mount or worsen. The knowledge explosion, the urban crisis, the burgeoning awareness of human alienation and frustration, our unabated ethnic, racial, sexual and religious prejudices, our persistent tendencies toward interpersonal, group and international violence, and the worldwide race between food, resources, and population – are merely a few of the items on the lengthening agenda. Our understanding of these problems is imperfect; our skilled manpower capable of working in these areas continues to be woefully deficient. Our colleges and universities face a major challenge in meeting these needs through our teaching and research facilities.

H. G. Wells once remarked that Twentieth Century society will be a race between education and chaos. I am confident that through our stewardship that race will be won by education.

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